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THE CONDUCT OF THE ADULT BIBLE CLASS.

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AN adult Bible class is probably less subject to rules than any other element in the Sunday school. Pedagogical science has opened up lines along which the teachers in the elementary and secondary departments of the Sunday school can work with considerable uniformity, but the adult class includes minds less in the making, and naturally more individual and independent, than those of children. It is the fact that the teacher is dealing with mature men and women rather than with immature boys and girls that must determine his method, and at the same time must make it difficult to do more than offer suggestions for the conduct of any specific class.

Roughly speaking, the methods of conducting classes may be reduced to two: (1) those according to which an effort is made to get the class to make preparation for the Sunday session, and (2) those according to which no preparation is sought, and the class becomes a sort of debating society under the direction of the teacher.

I. There is probably more difficulty, generally speaking, in getting the members of an adult class to make preparation for the lesson during the week than those of younger classes. The cares of the week are generally such that men and women think that they have little leisure for study. Yet often it is probable that such preparation would be made if the teacher were to plan the work properly. This is especially true of the classes which are not too large and are tolerably homogeneous, like those of young men or of women.

The success of this sort of work will depend upon the character of the subject studied. There are many topics which would be very serviceable and stimulating in the case of a class of boys and girls which are quite unsuited to adults. The business-man who is accustomed to virile thinking during the week, who finds himself confronted with certain definite difficulties, and who wishes to find some help in the Bible for the conduct of his daily life, is not likely to be specially attracted by a course of study in which the effort is chiefly made to retail the stories of Old Testament heroes. The adult class must deal

with subjects which will prompt to study. Probably there is nothing better than the life of Christ, the history of the apostolic church, the teaching of Jesus and the various New Testament writers, the history of the Hebrew people, and the teachings of the prophets in their historical relations. In each one of these instances the teacher will discover that there are certain definite subjects which can be treated best when different members of the class have come prepared to give information which could not otherwise be obtained.

If once a subject is chosen which is worthy of mature thought, the teacher very likely will find it possible so to divide up the subject for the coming Sunday among the members of the class that during the course of a quarter each member of the class will have done at least one definite piece of work. In the assignment of this work the teacher will be guided very largely by the capacity and special fitness of each student. It generally will be best if the class be conducted somewhat after the fashion of a literary club, a regular program being adopted at least for each month, if not for the entire quarter, with the various topics properly assigned. This element of definiteness is essential. It is idle to expect twenty-five or more people to study an entire lesson with any great care. Simply to give out a lesson paper and ask busy people to prepare themselves to answer the questions upon that paper is death to biblical study. In the case of any given lesson, however, whether it be an International Sunday-School Lesson or (as probably will prove better) some phase in a large subject, special topics should be assigned to special persons, and these topics discussed in the class. Interest almost inevitably will be awakened. The class really begins to study the Bible seriously. Just how these topics are to be assigned will have to be determined by the teacher. Perhaps in many cases it will be possible to assign a theme from the lesson help itself, especially if it be one of those published by the Bible Study Union. In other cases it will be possible to make use of the "Senior Bible Class" of the *Sunday School Times*, or, perhaps best of all, of the publications of the American Institute of Sacred Literature, which have the advantage of clear analysis and definite directions. In other cases the program will be made out by the teacher or the class wholly apart from lesson helps, and the class thus be led along lines independent of the rest of the school. In some cases it has been found feasible to use a text-book of some sort, each of the class being expected to have read at least one chapter, and to come prepared to discuss that chapter. Such a plan can be supplemented by the assignment of special papers on subjects

closely connected with the matter in the lesson. In other words, a good teacher will conduct his class in much the same way as a teacher in a college will conduct a college class. Whether the work be found good or poor, an adult class of this sort will be of inestimable help in developing intelligent and well-balanced Christians.

II. It is to be regretted, however, that in many Sunday classes it will be found impossible to induce the members of the Bible class to make any special preparation for the lesson hour. In such cases the burden of responsibility laid upon the teacher is increased. He must not only instruct his class, but he must with severe conscientiousness refuse to allow its members to give each other false instruction through ill-considered remarks and questions.

Two methods are here open to the teacher: he can use lesson helps, or he can teach without lesson helps. While it is true that there are certain advantages in the use of the lesson sheets published by the various denominational houses, it is probably better for the teacher of an adult class to take up an entire book or subject rather than the morsels of biblical writings provided by the international lessons. If he chooses the latter method, he must carefully indicate to his class in advance the relation of the passages which he is to consider to the general subject of the course. Thus, for example, if he is to devote several weeks to the great question of Pauline and Judaistic Christianity in the early church, he must subdivide the subject and assign to each subordinate topic its proper scriptural material. In other words, he must prepare a sort of syllabus for his class. Such a method has very marked advantages, but, of course, requires a specially studious teacher to be successful. The other method, of taking a complete book of the Bible and studying it as a unit, is, on the whole, the most practicable and helpful method for the teacher who cannot expect any special preparation on the part of his class. Thus, for example, in case the book is the epistle to the Galatians, he would naturally describe the historical situation out of which the letter arose, and then would proceed to the analysis and a running exposition of the letter. It would be a great help, of course, if he could put into the hands of his class a printed copy of the analysis which he is to follow.

When now he has begun the work upon the book itself, the following points are important as determining the general line of procedure:

1. He should see to it that each lesson completes a topic and does not leave the course of thought incomplete. In this matter he will be largely influenced by the amount of time at his disposal, and this should at the least be forty-five minutes.

2. He will, as far as possible, endeavor to cover a passage of considerable length, or at least of importance, in order that the teaching may concern itself with the broad line of thought rather than with the details. The great enemy of true theological perspective is the vicious habit of stopping to moralize in an unimportant clause, be it never so fascinating.

3. He will *interpret* before applying the passage under consideration.

More particularly, (1) in the conduct of an adult Bible class the teacher should always be ready to submit to interruptions. He may even sometimes adopt means to cause them. So far from their injuring the instruction, they are certain to awaken interest, and possibly lead to helpful discussions. Only, the teacher must keep his patience!

(2) The teacher must rigorously refuse to be led into the discussion of matters which are not vitally connected with the topic under discussion. Probably nothing will test his ability more than this. Every class of men and women contains people of one idea, and unless the teacher is exceedingly wary, such persons will shipwreck the class within a month. Discussion is absolutely necessary, but it must be the discussion of the lesson, and must be guided by the teacher.

(3) The teacher must not be too much afraid of hurting the feelings of his class. It is astonishing how many things can be said to a class by a teacher when he once enjoys its confidence. It very often happens that nothing will suffice to arouse the drooping interest of a class or to shut off tangential debate except some remark which runs the risk of possibly hurting someone's feelings. Of course, no man should be rude, but frankness, even if at times it is severe, is often necessary to shatter some hobby or to save the hour's instruction.

(4) At the close of the discussion the teacher should always recapitulate the important points. Details can be allowed to go.

(5) It does not need to be said that an earnestness which arises from a belief that the lesson hour is one of downright importance, and that the lesson is really worth teaching, is an absolute condition of all successful work. Not half so many Bible classes have been ruined by feeble moralizing and pathetic anecdotes — and they are legion — as by perfunctory teaching.